



Economic Development Strategic Plan - RCM2342AS

Task 7 Report

prepared for:

**City of Cape Coral Office of Economic and
Business Development.**

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Table Of Contents

7.a – Tourism Baseline..... 2

 Stakeholder Engagement 2

 Tourist Related Sites Visited 3

7.b – Tourism Analysis 4

 Introduction 4

 Recent Travel Trends that Relate to Cape Coral 4

 The Importance of Tourism to Cape Coral’s Overall Economic Development Strategy..... 7

7.c – SWOT Analysis..... 9

 Swot Analysis Definitions..... 9

 SWOT Analysis 10

7.d – Strategic Marketing Recommendations..... 15

 Development of Major Goals 15

 Goal #1: Support Efforts to Increase Activity and Access to Cape Coral’s Waterfront 16

 Goal #2: Continue to Develop and Promote Experiential Tourism Product by Expanding Outdoor Activities within the City..... 17

 Goal #3: Explore Opportunities to Work with Short-Term Rental Providers 18

 Goal #4: Further Develop the Already Existing Family Activity Cluster 19

 Goal #5: Leverage Current Assets and Create New Ones to Further Develop Youth, Adult & Scholastic Sports Facilities 20

 Goal #6: Enhance & Develop New Visitor-Focused Events..... 21

 Goal #7: Support the Development of More Unique Local Dining Options & Enhanced Evening Activities 22

 Goal #8: Encourage Cross-Promotion and Joint Packaging among Related Attraction 23

 Goal #9: Develop Locally Focused Marketing Efforts to Energize & Educate locals about Tourism in Cape Coral ... 24

 Goal #10: Consider a Co-op Marketing Approach with Certain Attractions 25

 Goal #11: Tourism Leadership & Collaboration / Partnerships 25

 Goal #12: Engage Higher Ed Institutions as a Catalyst..... 26

 Goal #13: Designate an Individual within the City Manager’s Office to be responsible for Tourism 27

7.c Task 7 Progress Report/video conference 28

Task 7: Tourism and Marketing Analysis

7.a – Tourism Baseline

Stakeholder Engagement

Tourism Research Sources

- August RSW Air Service Update¹
- Lee CVB Performance Indicators November 2022²
- Cape Coral Hotel Inventory - 2022-2023³

Interviews with key stakeholders with perspective and knowledge on the Cape Coral tourism industry were a crucial part of the research process. Alan Parter conducted a total of 12 interviews from a group of 16 key stakeholders. The interviewees were chosen through a collaborative discussion between the Cape Coral City Managers staff and the consulting team. The following individuals were interviewed as part of the stakeholder engagement process:

1. Jeremy Vincent – Jungle Bird and Front Porch Social
2. Katie Locklin – Parks & Recreation, Program Supervisor
3. JoAnn Elardo – Wicked Dolphin Rum Distillery
4. Jeff Mielke - Lee County Sports Development
5. Steve Geiger – General Manager Safe Harbor Marina
6. Gary Aubachon – Local Developer building Slipaway, a Food Truck/ Marina destination
7. Michael Ilczynszn – Cape Coral City Manager
8. Sharon Woodberry, Matt Grambow, Adrenna Peterson, Ashley Anderson– Cape Coral City Manager’s Office
9. Donna Germain – President, Cape Coral Chamber of Commerce
10. Bill Steinke – City Council Member & TDC Board (Ex-Officio)
11. Barry Kadel – General Manager Westin Hotel
12. Tamara Pigott & Pamela Johnson – President & Vice President, Ft. Myers Visitors Bureau

¹ Southwest Florida International Airport

² Lee County Convention and Visitors Bureau

³ Lee County Convention and Visitors Bureau

A discussion guide was utilized for each of the interviews to provide a common basis for the conversation, though each interviewee was encouraged to expound on their areas of interest and expertise. Discussion topics included:

- Perspectives on the current Cape Coral visitor experience
- Opinions and ideas regarding: individual attractions and events
- The tourism infrastructure
- Tourism marketing
- Potential partnerships
- Potential community tourism champions / cheerleaders
- Suggestions on how to address perceived gaps

Specific stakeholder comments are kept confidential to enable open feedback to be provided. Themes and findings from the stakeholder interviews are a key basis for the SWOT analysis presented in this report.

Tourist Related Sites Visited

The goal of site visits is to observe firsthand the visitor experience at the ground level, to connect with attraction operators where possible, and to understand the feel of the supporting infrastructure (wayfinding, food, lodging, etc.) that visitors experience in the City and Lee County.

1. Cape Coral Yacht Club
2. Wicked Dolphin Rum Distillery
3. Tito's Cantina
4. Westin Hotel
5. Tarpon Point Marina
6. 47th Terrace, Restaurant Row
7. Sun Splash Water Park
8. Gator Mike's Family Fun Park
9. Lake Kennedy Racquet Facility (Pickleball & Tennis Courts)
10. Skate Park
11. Bowling Alley
12. Dance Theater and Aerial Arts
13. Tropical Breeze Fun Park
14. Rotary Park Environmental Center
15. Four Mile Cove Ecological Preserve
16. Edison & Ford Estates, Museum, and Gardens
17. River Development/First Ave in Ft Myers

7.b – Tourism Analysis

Introduction

Although Cape Coral is not currently considered or recognized as a destination city, it is well positioned to improve its quality, status, and reputation as a tourist destination. While it is not a traditional South Florida tourism hotspot, since it has only one small beach, no traditional downtown, and a limited number of hotel rooms, it does possess ingredients that with further development can make it a competitive locale. In addition, it can increase use/occupancy of its vacation rentals and hotel rooms by better partnering with its neighboring Lee County destinations, to take advantage of their tourism assets, thereby expanding upon Cape Coral’s own tourism product.

Cape Coral needs to invest resources, both manpower and funding, to enhance its attractions and events that are currently drivers of visitor activity; develop new attractions; and to promote the city’s relaxed atmosphere, its connection to water, the availability to be active and involved with sports, its food scene, its family friendly activities, and the many opportunities to commune with nature.

The Planning Process

The strategic planning process was implemented in a sequence of three phases:

- 1) Research and Assessment: Gathering information relevant to assess Cape Coral’s tourism environment.
- 2) Situation Analysis: Synthesis of research findings into a Strengths / Opportunities / Weaknesses / Threats (SWOT) framework.
- 3) Strategic Recommendations: Development and documentation of recommendations and action steps that are prioritized within the Economic Development Strategic Plan.

Recent Travel Trends that Relate to Cape Coral

The Covid 19 pandemic and then Hurricane Ian caused an unprecedented disruption to the normal flow of visitor activity in Lee County. As the direct effects of these events have begun to

recede, the travel industry in general and Lee County in particular remain heavily influenced by changes in consumer expectations, behaviors, and habits that have emerged in the last few years. Several of the key travel trends relate directly to Cape Coral.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a term that covers a range of travel experiences in which visitors interact with and are conscious of the natural environment around them. For many travelers, broader consciousness around environmental and climate change issues has changed expectations for their travel experiences. This dynamic was supplemented during the pandemic by a greater emphasis on outdoor activities and natural spaces, as a reaction to concerns about safety conditions. Going forward, these patterns are likely to play out in different ways in different destinations. Some may offer travel opportunities related to sustainability, climate, or environmental preservation issues, while others may benefit from a greater emphasis on outdoor and immersive natural activities.

Increased Private Rentals

Platforms such as Airbnb, VRBO, Booking.com, and others have disrupted how people select a place for vacation. Private homes, condos, apartments, and rental of rooms, an area where Cape Coral is especially strong, have allowed individuals or small businesses to rent out their places, competing directly with hotels and resorts. While these platforms had been gaining market share pre-COVID, additional travelers used them for the first time during this period, as they sought to book a more “isolated” experience due to health concerns. This increased reach means that private rentals will be in the consideration set for a broader segment of travelers as they consider their trip options going forward.

Experiential Tourism

Over the course of several years (pre-dating the pandemic), consumers have increasingly seen travel as a way of understanding and appreciating alternative ways of life, learning new things about cultural and natural landscapes, and even as a means of self-discovery. This is often referred to as “authentic” or “experiential travel,” and it is gaining ground as a preferred way of exploring new places. These travelers seek to connect to a destination on an emotional level, and not experience the place as a mere backdrop for activities that could easily be experienced anywhere else. This trend goes hand to hand with the rise of the sharing economy (which can allow visitors to experience a destination “like a local”) as well as the greater availability of information on “hidden” experiences online and on social media, which allow visitors to learn

about more activities beyond the “must-see” headlines. Numerous sharing-based travel web platforms and apps have been developed that are geared toward tourists who seek to engage with locals and to understand destinations on a deeper level than seeing the traditional “tourist spots”. For Cape Coral, boating, either with a local or bare boating is an example of experiential tourism. The long-term trends in technology and social shifts driving this type of tourism are expected to expand this trend.

Hybrid Trips (Work from Anywhere):

The pandemic triggered an immediate jump in remote work activity. It appears that many office workers will remain in a remote or “hybrid” work arrangement that differs from the pre-COVID norm. For many workers, greater locational flexibility comes with the expectation that they are “available” for work even when not situated in the office. This changing dynamic has implications for travel, and even how workers conceive of when they are on “vacation.” Just as “hybrid workers” are sometimes in the office and sometimes remote, there is an emerging category of “hybrid trips” in which travelers are participating in leisure activities but remaining engaged with work activities. This greater flexibility opens the possibility of new destinations or experiences than those that travelers have traditionally sought within the pure “leisure” or “business” trip categories.

Shorter Stays (Micro-cations)

Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, populations around the world experienced prolonged periods of isolation from family, friends, and the outside world, resulting in a pent-up desire to reconnect and experience “normal” activities. While many expressed a desire to take an initial “big vacation” when conditions allowed, long term trends dating back to before the pandemic point towards shorter vacations as the norm. This trend is associated with the Millennial generation, which has less of a tendency to “unplug” for extended vacations. Shortened length of stays would tend to advantage domestic travel over international, and advantage more accessible destinations (Cape Coral is easily accessible both by air and automobile) over more challenging ones to get to. Micro-cations also pose a financial benefit for travelers, since shorter stays often result in cheaper price tags, which in turn increases tourists’ willingness to travel.

Multigenerational

There are several factors that collectively contribute to the rising popularity of multigenerational tourism, making it a preferred choice for many families looking to maximize

their vacation experiences. Some of the evolving, economic, and technological factors are: improved health and longevity; increased disposable income for many older adults; changing family dynamics with many modern families often living further apart; work flexibility making it easier for parents to combine work and vacation time; families recognize travel's educational value and it allows grandparents to share knowledge with younger generations; with a concern for safety and security families are more comfortable traveling together; fits well within a broader trend in tourism towards niche and personalized travel experiences. Cape Coral with an older population (although the demographics are changing) and activities that are of interest to families, can benefit from this trend.

The Importance of Tourism to Cape Coral's Overall Economic Development Strategy

Improved tourism will have significant economic, social, and environmental impacts on the city. Some of the examples are:

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Revenue Generation: Tourism generates substantial revenue through the spending of tourists on accommodation, food, transportation, entertainment, and shopping.

Job Creation: The tourism industry creates direct employment opportunities in hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and attractions, as well as indirect jobs in related sectors such as construction, retail, and transportation. This can be especially true of Cape Coral, which is dominated by small businesses. Travel-dependent leisure and hospitality is the largest small business employer in the US, and it can have a significant impact on Cape Coral.

Business & Residential Growth: A stronger reputation as a tourist destination will positively affect Cape Coral's perception as a business destination since today's tourist often becomes tomorrow's business owner or homeowner. Several of the individuals interviewed for this assignment were first introduced to Cape Coral as visitors.

Infrastructure Development: The demand for tourism often leads to improved infrastructure, such as airports, parks, roads, and public transportation, benefiting both tourists and residents.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BENEFITS

Quality of Life: Enhanced amenities and services developed for tourists, such as parks, restaurants, and recreational facilities, can also improve the quality of life for residents.

Preservation of Heritage: The interest of tourists in historical, cultural, and environmental sites often leads to their preservation, restoration, and expansion.

Community Development: Tourism can stimulate the development of local communities, providing funds for public services, healthcare, and education.

Cultural Exchange: Tourism fosters cultural exchange and understanding between people from different backgrounds.

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

Conservation Efforts: Revenue from tourism can be directed toward the conservation of natural landscapes, wildlife, and marine environments.

Awareness and Education: Tourism can raise awareness about environmental issues and the importance of preserving natural resources and ecosystems.

Cape Coral is situated to unlock its improved tourism driven economic potential. This is the opportune time for the city to take full advantage of its location, available land, resources, and human capital to advance the economic vitality of the city. To achieve this, it will need to move forward on several fronts:

1. **Product Development** – Build upon the city assets to enhance existing tourism products and attract new ones.
2. **Tourism Infrastructure** – Invest in smart infrastructure resources to support tourism related growth.
3. **Collaboration** – Strengthen collaboration with private sector, public/private sector organizations, and other governments to advance tourism.
4. **Strong Implementation** – Put plans into action, monitor progress, and adjust as needed.
5. **Economic Vitality** – Attract more businesses that continue to contribute to the quality of life.

The recommendations laid out in this report are designed to help guide the priorities and activities to be considered over the next few years. Within this framework, strategic decisions will need to be made to implement the plan, take advantage of funding opportunities, and

respond to changing conditions as they emerge. All recommendations are action oriented to achieve the goals of increasing tourism activity and improving the economic vitality of the city.

7.c – SWOT Analysis

Swot Analysis Definitions

Strengths

- ❖ Attributes of Cape Coral that are helpful in achieving a successful tourism initiative.
 - What does Cape Coral do better than others?
 - What do others see as Cape Coral’s strengths?
 - What unique resources can Cape Coral draw upon?

Weaknesses / Challenges

- ❖ Attributes of Cape Coral that are harmful to achieving a successful tourism initiative.
 - Where does Cape Coral have fewer resources than others?
 - What others are likely to see as Cape Coral’s weaknesses?
 - What places Cape Coral at a disadvantage?

Opportunities

- ❖ Factors that could be helpful to Cape Coral in achieving a successful tourism initiative.
 - What elements could Cape Coral exploit to its advantage?
 - What activities and trends can Cape Coral take advantage of?

Threats

- ❖ Factors that could be harmful in achieving a successful tourism initiative.
 - What activities and trends have the potential to cause trouble to Cape Coral?

SWOT Analysis

Key findings from the secondary research, interviews, and site visits conducted in the Assessment phase have been assembled by the consulting team into a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis. This framework considers both positive and negative aspects of the regional tourism industry, and also considers which aspects are internal to Cape Coral and which are impacted by external forces. Elements of the SWOT analysis are divided into three categories to provide a foundation for the categories of strategic recommendations that follow. These categories are:

- ❖ **Tourism Attractions / Infrastructure / Visitor Experience:** represents the attractions, activities, and infrastructure that tourists engage in once they are within Cape Coral
- ❖ **Marketing / Branding:** represents the ways in which the destination is promoted and positioned to potential visitors.
- ❖ **Organization / Collaboration:** represents the way that Cape Coral and other key stakeholders within the industry and region interface to grow the industry collectively.

STRENGTHS

❖ **Tourism Attractions / Infrastructure / Visitor Expérience**

1. Growing residential population, which can further encourage already existing strong category of Visiting Friends & Family travelers.
2. Changing demographic that is more amenable to change and development.
3. Major Home Rental Market for Vacationers – over 4,000 homes and 350 private rooms available.
4. Numerous opportunities to rent a house and boat together, canals enhance rental properties.
5. Major Hotel - Westin Hotel – significant anchor for tourism activity
6. Favorable location
7. Proximity to Airport, major highways, and neighboring tourist communities.
8. One of safest cities in Florida
9. Sports Tourism – an already existing, active, and effective government involvement.
10. Increasingly Strong Restaurant and Food Scene
11. Water Activities – boating, dolphin tours, fishing, kayaking
12. Winter warm weather destination (but lots of nearby competition)
13. Major League Baseball Spring Training nearby

14. Respectable Events Scheule including festivals, parades, and concerts

❖ **Marketing / Branding**

1. Marketing to International (primarily German) tourists, helps with shoulder and off-season visitation.
2. A local chamber of commerce that assists with tourism promotion - runs welcome center (50-60,000 visitors a year), promotes events, strong Visit Cape Coral section of its website.
3. An active County VCB with a knowledgeable and experienced staff.

❖ **Organization / Collaboration**

1. Tourism is included in Economic Development Planning – understanding of the importance of increased visitor activity to the future of economic vitality.
2. Local pride

WEAKNESSES / CHALLENGES

❖ **Tourism Attractions / Infrastructure / Visitor Expérience**

1. Distance Between Attractions – Attractions located sporadically across the city. Significant distances between attractions, most of which are only accessible by car.
2. Limited Number of Hotel Rooms
3. Limited access to water for additional tourism development
4. Insufficient number of public boat ramps
5. No Defined Visitor Domain – a place that signals to tourists that it is a place for them to congregate, wander, stay, and extend their experience.
6. Limited Cultural attractions
7. Limited Night life
8. Limited Tourism related signage
9. Limited Retail Shopping Opportunities that are attractive to tourists
10. Limited Public Transportation options.
11. Insufficient large businesses, not enough hotel rooms, and competitive convention operation in Ft. Myers makes it impractical to prioritize convention / business tourism for Cape Coral.

❖ **Marketing / Branding**

1. Limited cohesive strategy related specifically to Cape Coral
2. The city lacks a distinct visitor image - not a must see stop on itineraries of out-of-town tourists.
3. Not considered a destination city
4. Lack of Clear Identity that is easily recognizable and identifiable to visitors and distinguishes it from its nearby neighbors and competitors.
5. Lack of Compelling or Iconic Destination / Defining Attraction – No year-round, must see, attraction that brings consistent visitor traffic and defines the visitor image of the destination.
6. Limited Cross Promotion & Collaboration – the lack of cooperation impacts marketing and packaging opportunities for broader visitor appeal.

❖ **Organization / Collaboration**

1. Limited collaboration / partnerships among public entities (local government, regional partners, tourism attractions, public-private partnerships, marketing organizations, community members, universities, philanthropic organizations) to enhance the tourism product and marketing to tourists.
2. Insufficient focus on tourism
3. Few philanthropic organizations provide funding for tourism related projects.
4. City does not have a strong base of corporate employment to attract regular business travel.

OPPORTUNITIES

❖ **Tourism Attractions / Infrastructure / Visitor Experience**

1. Further Develop & Promote Parks & Preserves – continue to build and enhance organized tours and trails to link together related activities by location and interest.
2. Distinguish City’s Outdoor Recreational Assets – with increased emphasis on outdoor tourism, Cape Coral’s outdoor assets may be seen as “generic’ relative to its neighbors. The city needs to distinguish the unique experience and assts to enhance outdoor tourism as a trip driver.
3. Potential Additional Eco-Tourism Attractions
 - a. Wetlands – Red Fish Point

- b. Botanical Gardens
 - c. Ropes Course / zip lines
 - d. Stables (maybe at Yellow Fever Park)
 - e. Greater access to river and bay for boating
 - f. Bike Paths
 - g. Disc golf
4. Make canals more tourism friendly, create activities on the canals.
 5. Canal Based events/festivals.
 6. Guided Canal Tours
 7. Water Taxis for River and Bay as well as canals.
 8. Further develop and promote the already existing cluster of attractions that are family friendly.
 - a. Sunsplash Water Park, new Racquet Sports Center, Gator Mikes Family Fun Park (Go Carts, Paint Ball, Mini golf, ropes and zip line), Dance theatre and aerial arts, bowling alley, skate park, Wicked Dolphin Rum Distillery
 9. Enhance an already existing event schedule.
 10. Enhance sports fields available for Sports Tourism to achieve greater participation in the already existing Lee County Sports Development program.
 11. Create (develop) more public boat ramps with adequate parking facilities to encourage kayaking, jet skiing, and other activities.
 12. Take advantage of Ft Myer's attractions (River Walk/First Street, Edison Ford Estate, beaches, etc.) by creating cross promotion initiatives.

❖ **Marketing / Branding**

1. Build relationships with booking platforms like Airbnb, VRBO, Trip Advisor, Expedia, etc.
2. Develop package strategy to help promote attractions - package deals, joint ticketing, etc.
3. Educate Locals on the benefits of tourism and Cape Coral's tourism assets to build word of mouth advertising as well as gather support for tourism initiatives.
4. Engage and incentivize restaurants and merchants to take a more active role in tourism promotion and events.
5. Consider outreach to tour operators and travel media, i.e. fam trips and public relations initiatives.
6. Participate in collaborative marketing campaigns, trade shows, tourism fairs

❖ **Organization / Collaboration**

1. Identify opportunities to collaborate with local Universities.
2. Consider use of Eminent Domain or Swapping Properties to develop tourism attractions.
3. Expedite permitting for development related to tourism.
4. Take advantage of VCB's free Customer Service Program (Guest First), i.e. train vacation rental hosts.
5. Obtain a clearer delineation of how much tourist tax Cape Coral contributes.
6. Obtain voting membership status for Cape Coral representatives on Ft. Myers VCB
7. Help strengthen cultural tourism by increasing funding and awareness of Cape Create program.
8. Pursue more TDC funding for Cape Coral related projects in all three categories; Attractions Marketing, Event marketing; Beach & Shoreline
9. Identify more champions / cheerleaders for tourism in the government and private sector.
10. Partnering – city, VCB, Chamber, South Cape Hospitality & Entertainment Association, universities, hotel & restaurant association, newspapers & radio station.
11. Create a small department or designate an individual within the Economic Development division of the Cape Coral City Manager's office with specific responsibility for tourism.

THREATS

❖ **Tourism Attractions / Infrastructure / Visitor Experience**

1. Increasing traffic congestion & limited parking
2. Surrounding beaches drawing tourists from Cape Coral
3. Neighboring destinations increasing their tourism funding.

❖ **Marketing / Branding**

1. Concern that Ft. Myers Visitor's Bureau does not sufficiently promote Cape Coral
2. Insufficient data regarding Cape Coral's contribution of tourist taxes.
3. Limited awareness of tourism assets among locals
4. Ft. Myers VCB website has underrepresentation for Cape Coral
5. Surrounded by better known destinations.

❖ **Organization / Collaboration**

1. Difficult and slow permitting process for new development.
2. Residents question community’s leadership’s understanding of the importance of and commitment to tourism.
3. Lack of influential tourism cheerleaders – not enough powerful, political, and private sector individuals to champion tourism and its economic benefits to the city.

7.d – Strategic Marketing Recommendations

Development of Major Goals

- Ensure that tourism is a major contributor to the area’s economic growth and prosperity.
- Improve the area’s quality of life.
- Improve Cape Coral’s overall image regionally, nationally, and internationally.

Strategic Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are responsive to the major challenges and opportunities identified in the situation assessment and SWOT analysis. Recommendations are advanced in three categories:

- ❖ **Tourism Attractions / Infrastructure / Visitor Experience** sets forth recommendations to enhance the activities and infrastructure that tourists to the city encounter.
- ❖ **Marketing / Branding** sets forth recommendations related to the promotional efforts of Cape Coral.
- ❖ **Organization / Collaboration** sets forth recommendations as to how those responsible and involved in tourism in Cape Coral can interface with other private and public entities to enhance outcomes for the industry.

Recommendations in this section are reviewed in terms of their rationale and in terms of implementation:

- **Rationale** -- connects each recommendation to the situation analysis and SWOT reviewed in this report, describing how it meets a strategic need or opportunity to build tourism in Cape Coral.

- **Implementation** -- describes steps to be taken to achieve the recommended objective.
- **Timing** -- characterized as either short-term or long-term recommendations that lend themselves to immediate first steps or “quick wins” from those that require a more extended process. This section also sets forth the organizations needed to be involved, distinguishing recommendations that are largely within the purview of Cape Coral City Manager’s office under its current mission and budget from those that require coordination or resources from external public and private sector actors.
- **Examples** – where relevant, examples from other destinations are included to provide additional context, with the understanding that applications will differ by location.

The implementation of any set of strategic recommendations over time must always in practice evolve to shifting conditions and opportunities. Therefore, recommendations are not labeled by priority level, but rather along two dimensions that help the city to understand and manage these opportunities.

TOURISM ATTRACTIONS / INFRASTRUCTURE / VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Goal #1: Support Efforts to Increase Activity and Access to Cape Coral’s Waterfront

Rationale: The most unique aspect of Cape Coral is its relationship to water. In addition to the River and the Bay, it has an unusual 400-mile canal system. It is a destination that can and should provide a substantially wider range of water-related activities than its competitors. However, because of the city’s development history - historic development patterns have led to limited commercial and recreational activity along the Caloosahatchee riverfront and the vast majority of the access to the canals is privately controlled - the water activity and access is substantially short of its potential. In addition to becoming an attractive tourist attraction, better use of the riverfront can improve the connectivity to attractions between Ft. Myers and the nearby islands. Recent trends have re-animated riverfront areas in cities across the country and have been successful in attracting additional attractions, helping to draw tourists, and enhancing the city’s reputation as a tourist destination. The riverfront experience also represents a potential point of differentiation between Cape Coral and its nearby tourism

competitors. While these infrastructure investments will take time, funding, careful planning, and community participation to develop, they present the most significant tourism opportunity to enhance the visitor experience in Cape Coral and make it a recognized destination.

Implementation: Locations for public and commercial access to the water need to be identified. The city needs to identify, attract, and work with private sector operators who can provide shoreline attractions, restaurants, etc. and activities such as Water taxis, themed boat tours, fishing, sailing lessons, jet skiing, specialty boats, kayaks, canoes, etc.

Timing: Long-Term • Driver: Public/Private sector led

Example: San Antonio, TX is one of the most well-known riverfront tourism successes. Cape Coral doesn't control sufficient river or bay front property to build on the scale of San Antonio or even Providence or Cincinnati. A more relevant example, on a smaller scale is Bristol Waterfront Park in Bristol, PA. It is an active riverfront park located on the banks of the Delaware River. The park attracts visitors with ample opportunities for outdoor recreation such as concerts, festivals, boating, and outdoor dining. Moreover, the park includes several place-based strategies, including docks for fishing, monuments, and a wharf for boating. Bristol Waterfront became one of the main destinations in the borough as a complement to Bristol's historical sites and attracts crowds generating a vibrant community space.

Goal #2: Continue to Develop and Promote Experiential Tourism Product by Expanding Outdoor Activities within the City

Rationale: There is a growing emphasis on experiences over material goods in many cultures. Families value shared experiences and creating memories together more than ever before. With the increased proliferation of information, travelers continue to seek to connect to destinations on an emotional level and experience the "hidden" and "authentic" experiences that are unique to a location. For a destination like Cape Coral without a signature anchor attraction or "touristy" area, this trend presents an opportunity to compete with better known destinations. Creating and promoting these experiences requires consistent effort and collaboration to bring ideas to fruition and get the visitor experience visitor ready. Companies such as Airbnb have understood this trend and developed "Airbnb Experiences", which connects local tour and activity providers with travelers who want to experience interesting activities in their vacation destination with a knowledgeable local. Cape Coral's inhabitants can provide experiences along these lines. For instance, the many different types of boating activities can be

more interesting and safer when provided by a skilled local. Cooking and cocktail making classes at the city's restaurants, animal encounters in the Eco parks and on the water, and a photography tour are additional examples.

Implementation: Work with the vacation rental community and hotels to identify, develop, and promote visitor experiences such as: • Outdoor and water adventure activities (zip lines, frooms, boating, etc.) • Food and drink (interactive experiences at restaurants and brew masters) • Arts and culture programming (opportunities to meet artists, tour cultural and historic locations).

Timing: Short-Term • **Driver:** City-Led, partner with VCB to make it part of the training in its Guests First program and target hosts of vacation rentals.

Goal #3: Explore Opportunities to Work with Short-Term Rental Providers

Rationale: Short-term rental sites (like Airbnb, VRBO, Booking.com, HomeAway) have captured a material share of the visitor market, expanding their reach further during the pandemic. Stays generated through these sites are generally longer than hotel stays and have been brought within the hotel tax regulatory framework in Cape Coral, meaning that they can generate considerable dollars to support tourism promotion efforts. Cape Coral has an unusually high presence on these sites. On Airbnb alone, there are over 4,000 homes and 350 private rooms available for rental in Cape Coral. By comparison, Fort Lauderdale has around the same number of active listings, while Tallahassee has around 1,000. Rochester, NY has around 1,300 active listings, Frisco, TX around 1,000. Cape Coral should work closely with short-term rental providers. Such a partnership could help the local hosts by educating them to be more successful; provide tourism information and improved experiences to their guests visiting the city; and should a collaboration with these various platforms be achieved, Cape Coral's marketing would benefit by reaching the various platform's global audience.

Implementation: Cape Coral has recently conducted research to identify and understand the inventory and location of properties that appear regularly on sites like Airbnb. Airbnb has formal partnerships with various destinations around the world — working with these locations to educate locals on hosting/home-sharing as well as co-promoting travel to the destinations. Here are some examples: <https://news.airbnb.com/tag/dmo/> <https://news.airbnb.com/an-update-on-our-work-to-strengthen-our-communities/> These initiatives are led by the public policy team. publicpolicy@airbnb.com Ft. Myers VCB has worked with Airbnb in the past regarding

recovery from Hurricane Ian. Some opportunities to work with various rental providers can include:

- Develop partnership with the various rental platform sites to help with acquiring new listings and joint promotions.
- The Ft. Myers VCB, nonprofit, or university partners can work to educate the destination’s current and potential hosts to provide a better experience for the visitors and better manage their businesses to be more profitable.
- Work anywhere initiative to promote Cape Coral as a desirable and remote-worker friendly destination for short-term stays that tie into tourism and leisure activities. Explore opportunities to engage with these operators and help them attract tourists and develop more tailored experiential components for the platforms. Marketing the rentals and experiences would also entail educating the renters by providing them with information and materials about the nearby attractions that their tenants can enjoy.

Timing: Short-Term • **Driver:** City, working with VCB, Cape Coral Chamber of Commerce, universities, and relevant nonprofits.

Example: The Russell Innovation Center for Entrepreneurs (RICE) and Airbnb created a partnership called the Entrepreneurship Academy in Atlanta. The initiative supports local residents in embracing the economic opportunities created by hosting and entrepreneurship, The Academy, provided by Airbnb, is a flexible and interactive education program focused on empowering more people from diverse communities – in Atlanta. The Academy offered two distinct programs to better understand the barriers that the Atlanta community faces, support entrepreneurs and unlock tourism potential, and identify solutions and educational materials to support community members who want to become successful Hosts on Airbnb. To help more travelers visit Georgia black-owned farms, Airbnb partnered with New Communities Land trust to promote the Southwest Georgia Agri-tourism Trail, a collection of stays and experiences.

Goal #4: Further Develop the Already Existing Family Activity Cluster

Rationale: Child friendly activities/entertainment are particularly valuable for Cape Coral as a draw for visiting friends and family tourism, multigenerational tourism, and residents’ quality of life. With most of the city’s attractions widely disbursed, one existing cluster of attractions relates to activities that are popular with youth. They are located in close proximity near Kennedy Lake - Sunsplash Water Park, new Racquet Sports Center, Gator Mikes Family Fun Park (Go Carts, Paint Ball, Mini golf, ropes course and zip line), Dance Theatre and Aerial arts, bowling alley, skate park, and Wicked Dolphin Rum Distillery. Currently, however, there is no

connectivity between these attractions and no supporting infrastructure – restaurants and tourist retail.

Implementation: Step one is to bring the current attractions together to obtain ideas as to how they can work together to better deliver a coordinated product, determine what else should be added to the mix, and how to better market and brand the family activity cluster. Step Two is to identify additional family related activities such as disc golf, laser tag, golf driving range, and indoor gaming arcade with ax throwing, climbing walls, etc. Step three is to identify supporting infrastructure, such as restaurants and retail. Step four find interested developers to build the attractions and infrastructure, and Step five is to help those developers achieve their objectives. Step six is to actively market this family friendly activity cluster.

Timing: Step One Short-Term; Steps Two and Three Long Term Driver: City together with current and future attractions.

Example: Adventure Crossing USA is located adjacent to Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson Township New Jersey and near recently built outlet malls located in the area. Adventure Crossing is being built as a mix of a retail dining and entertainment complex. The complex has a deluxe driving range and surf park and wave pool, as well as multiple buildings that house a large gaming arcade, laser tag, sports bar, ax throwing, climb wall, and multiple restaurants. It is being designed to complement the Six Flags experience and become a regional tourism magnet.

Adventure Crossing USA | Golf & Entertainment Treetop Quest is an aerial adventure park with obstacle ropes course and ziplines with locations in located in Gwinnett and Dunwoody, Georgia; Greenville, South Carolina, and Philadelphia. Courses and tickets are available for both youth and adults. The treetop is primarily a self-guided activity involving climbing, obstacles, and zip lines. Group outings for schools, with lessons connected to environmental science, biology, physics, and physical education are available. The site also hosts corporate outings with leadership lessons.

Goal #5: Leverage Current Assets and Create New Ones to Further Develop Youth, Adult & Scholastic Sports Facilities

Rationale: Sports tourism is multifaceted in that it combines travel, sports, and cultural exchange. It offers numerous benefits to destinations and participants alike. Its growth necessitates careful planning to maximize benefits while minimizing potential downsides, ensuring that it remains a positive force for economic and social development. This type of

tourism can be classified into various categories, each catering to different interests and activities within the realm of sports. These categories include Event-Based Sports Tourism - Traveling to attend major sporting events; Active Sports Tourism - Traveling to participate in sports and recreational activities such as golfing, hiking, scuba diving, or marathon running and amateur athletes traveling for competitions or training camps. Nostalgia Sports Tourism - Traveling to visit sports-related attractions such as sports museums, halls of fame, or historic sports venues; Celebrity and Icon Sports Tourism - Travel motivated by the chance to see or meet sports celebrities and icons, including attending events like autograph signings, sports conventions, or personal appearances by athletes. Lee County understands the value of sports tourism and has a stand-alone department, the Sports Development Department, dedicated exclusively to sports tourism and which works very closely with the County's Parks and Recreation Department. The county attracts a full calendar of youth, college, and adult competitions and training programs and a significant number of visitors to attend the Red Sox and Twins spring training. As a result, the region has a vibrant sports tourism program. Unfortunately, because the quality and quantity of the sports facilities and fields in Cape Coral are not as good as in Ft Myers and because there are fewer hotel rooms and less family friendly activities, it receives a smaller share of the benefits of this important tourism driver. By devoting resources to several related areas, Cape Coral can better benefit from the already strong sports tourism to the region.

Implementation: Cape Coral can obtain greater benefit from Sports tourism by 1) upgrading the current fields and building new ones; 2) enhancing and promoting Cape Coral's already existing Family Activity Cluster (see #4 above); 3) working together with the Westin and other Cape Coral hotels to market to the sports tourism participants; 4) working with the home vacation rental hosts to target the youth, scholastic, and adult athletes coming to the region to compete and train and to those coming to watch spring training baseball; 5) working together with the Athletic Division to develop Pickleball competitions at the new Racquet Facility and making the sports tourism visitors aware of Cape Coral's strong food scene.

Timing: Long Term; City together with various organizations depending upon which of the above activities are pursued.

Goal #6: Enhance & Develop New Visitor-Focused Events

Rationale: Event tourism is a specialized segment of the tourism industry that focuses on the planning, development, and marketing of events to attract visitors to a destination. These

events can range from small local festivals to large international gatherings and can include a variety of types such as cultural festivals, sports competitions, music concerts, conferences, and exhibitions. Event tourism is designed to enhance a destination’s appeal, stimulate economic activity, and provide memorable experiences for both locals and visitors. Events can also be valuable by helping to attract visitors during off-peak seasons, thereby stabilizing tourism flows throughout the year and it is often leveraged to attract additional investments for tourism and other economic development related activities. In addition, events provide small businesses an opportunity to market and sell products and to share and display local pride. Cape Coral already has a base of events but can benefit from additional events that are tourist focused and highlight activities that promote the city’s strengths. By carefully planning, marketing, and sometimes managing events, Cape Coral can leverage these occasions to attract new types of visitors, stimulate its economy, and create lasting positive impacts on its infrastructure.

Implementation: The City’s role is to stimulate and act as a catalyst to create new events that will attract tourists. Develop a committee that will review the current schedule with the objective of finding ways to enhance or create new events and festivals. Concentrate on those assets that are unique or particularly strong in Cape Coral. A pickleball tournament at the new Racquet facility, water related events such as boat races and fishing competitions, and food and music related events promoting the restaurant and food scene are examples. Have the employee and interns referenced in Recommendation #3 under Organization / Collaboration work with local partners to recruit vendors, participants, and sponsors. This individual would also have other tourism related responsibilities relating to other recommendations made in this report.

Timing: Long Term – work with partners who have expertise for the proposed events and with organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and VCB.

Goal #7: Support the Development of More Unique Local Dining Options & Enhanced Evening Activities

Rationale: Cape Coral has an increasingly strong restaurant and food scene and is becoming known in the County as a place to dine out. A good restaurant scene is important to tourism for several reasons: 1) Food is a significant part of a region’s culture. Tourists often seek to experience local cuisine as a way to understand and appreciate the culture and traditions of the place they are visiting. A vibrant restaurant scene can showcase the local flavors and culinary practices; 2) High-quality and diverse dining options can attract tourists to a destination and

encourage them to stay longer. Memorable dining experiences can be a highlight of a trip, making tourists more likely to recommend the destination to others and to return themselves; 3) Restaurants contribute significantly to the local economy by creating jobs and supporting local suppliers. 4) Destinations known for their exceptional food scenes can use this reputation as a key marketing tool. Culinary tourism is a growing trend, with many travelers specifically seeking destinations known for their food and dining experiences; 5) Dining out is a social activity that often includes entertainment, ambiance, and an opportunity to relax and enjoy the surroundings. A lively restaurant scene can enhance the overall entertainment options for tourists, making the destination more appealing; 6) Positive dining experiences can lead to good reviews and high satisfaction among tourists. This can improve the destination’s overall reputation and rankings on travel review platforms, attracting more visitors; 7) A diverse restaurant scene caters to various dietary preferences and budgets, ensuring that all tourists can find dining options that suit their tastes and needs. This inclusivity enhances the overall appeal of the destination. For all these reasons, it is a good idea to enhance what is already an important component of Cape Coral’s attractiveness.

Implementation: Identify ways to further develop infrastructure in the “food” zones and recruit restaurant operators to open unique concepts and differing cuisines in concentrated areas. Possibly create a kitchen incubator to support the growth of small food businesses that expand dining option in the city and communicate with local universities to investigate their interest in a culinary school.

Timing: Long -Term – work with restaurant association, potential developers, the Chamber of Commerce, South Cape Hospitality & Entertainment Association, and nonprofit organizations focused on entrepreneurship and workforce development.

MARKETING / BRANDING

Goal #8: Encourage Cross-Promotion and Joint Packaging among Related Attraction

Rationale: The visitor experience is strengthened when multiple activities are linked together. Coordinating multiple activities increases the chance that a trip yields additional overnight stays and sends a message that multiple attractions are compatible, and a destination is robust even for visitors that do not book the package directly. This linking can take multiple forms, from agreements among locations to cross-promote each other’s offerings, collaborative

participation under a common umbrella of a “trail” to direct joint-promotion of discounted combined tickets.

Implementation: The Economic Development division of the City Manager’s office can serve as a formal and informal convener and facilitator of partnership conversation among related attractions. These partnerships could be incentivized by promotional opportunities offered by the city or VCB. One example to pursue would be the family friendly attractions described in Recommendation # 4 described above. A broader approach is to develop a Cape Coral Pass that leverages partnerships between attractions, transportation services, hotels, and dining establishments to create value-packed deals that encourage tourists to explore more of what the destination has to offer.

Timing: Long-Term • Driver: Partner-Led but city assisted by city.

Goal #9: Develop Locally Focused Marketing Efforts to Energize & Educate locals about Tourism in Cape Coral

Rationale: It is important that locals become aware of the commitment that is being made to tourism and that an overall plan and specific activities have been initiated. This increases the likelihood of buy-in for tourism development from community stakeholders and elected officials. Members of the community can provide some of the best “word of mouth” advertising for the city by informing family, friends, and business colleagues of the benefit of visiting Cape Coral. In addition, tourism advertising targeted at locals will help attract residents and host vacation rental landlords to various attractions they are unaware of and help increase local pride. The return on investment is often worth taking some money away from traditional target market tourism marketing campaigns.

Implementation: Devote a small marketing budget targeted to locals to promoting the city’s tourist attractions and overall plan. Host a one-day tourism summit for key leaders and stakeholders with speakers highlighting tourism assets and potential tourism development activities. Provide space at the tourism summit for individual attractions to have booths to promote themselves.

Timing: Short-term Coordination among City, VCB, and Chamber of Commerce.

Goal #10: Consider a Co-op Marketing Approach with Certain Attractions

Rationale: Co-op tourism marketing allows organizations like the VCB and the City to partner with attractions, restaurants, and tourism related retailers to pool marketing budgets and messaging, helping them more easily scale campaigns, reduce resource constraints, and pursue larger marketing efforts by offering new opportunities for campaign messaging, communications channels, and engagement tactics. Co-op marketing allows attractions to access high-value placements that they would struggle to achieve with their own resources. The VCB currently has a co-op advertising program, however, it is important to ensure that Cape Coral organizations take greater advantage of this program and find new ways to stretch their marketing dollars and test new/emerging tactics.

Implementation: Develop a list of attractions and businesses to target for joining co-op marketing opportunities.

Timing: Short Term - Work with VCB, Chamber of Commerce, and attractions.

ORGANIZATION / COLLABORATION

Goal #11: Tourism Leadership & Collaboration / Partnerships

Rationale: A primary reason that Cape Coral has not fulfilled its potential as a tourist destination is because there is insufficient discussion or understanding of the value or impact of leisure tourists visiting the city. As a result, leisure tourism has not been a priority. To build and maintain a successful tourism environment it is necessary to have two important ingredients; 1) Individuals with power and community respect who are willing to take on leadership roles to champion or be cheerleaders for tourism and 2) Effective and dynamic partnerships. The experiences and amenities that appeal to visitors to a destination often align with those that appeal to residents and businesses, and many destinations have sought to unify messaging and branding between tourism, business, and residential attraction efforts. Greater alignment and coordination are critical goals as Cape Coral has limited resources and staff capacity for its existing focus on the core audience of potential visitors.

Tourism ecosystems depend on numerous public and private partners working together to thrive and reach their potential. Destination marketing organizations have an important role to play but cannot position the industry for success all on their own. The City Manager's office

needs to be active in 1) looking for potential collaborators that can help achieve results for the industry; 2) facilitating collaborations between members of the industry; and 3) maximizing the resources available to the city and its positioning within the tourism ecosystem. Such collaborators could be tourism attractions; the Chamber of Commerce; other city and county agencies such as Parks & Recreation, Sports Development, and the planning commission; public/private partnerships; philanthropies; universities; neighboring cities, towns, and villages. These potential collaborations and partnerships will help provide opportunities to further develop Cape Coral's credibility and identify resources, both money and manpower, that are available to expand its impact.

Implementation: Appropriate, well respected local leaders with an interest in and knowledge of tourism and hospitality need to be identified and approached about taking an active role in leading the charge to improve the tourism environment in Cape Coral. In addition, coordination meetings with planned agendas are needed among the potential partner organizations. Where possible, Cape Coral can seek to ensure that its tourist-facing messaging is compatible with (which does not necessarily mean identical to) messaging aimed at business and resident attraction. These collaborations and partnerships should facilitate the greater sharing of resources such as video, photography, and written content on city experiences and amenities. Additional funding sources will be needed for the city to effectively expand its impact through more destination management activities and greater alignment with county efforts to attract visitors.

Timing: Short-Term • **Driver:** City - Led together with various potential partners

Goal #12: Engage Higher Ed Institutions as a Catalyst

Rationale: Universities are closely tied to tourism activity in many destinations. Narrowly, higher ed institutions draw visitation in the form of parents and friends, and their students are looking to engage in off-campus activities. More broadly, these institutions have a vital interest in the quality of life of the region as they compete to attract students, faculty, and staff. As a result, university leaders are often important participants in economic development, and can be leaders in visioning long-term improvements. There are several higher ed institutions in Lee County that are strategically located, and well-positioned to help support issues relevant to the tourism industry. In particular, Florida Gulf Coast University, which has specifically related programs at the School of Resort & Hospitality Management and the Water School.

Implementation: Call a meeting of the relevant individuals at the various educational institutions of higher education and engage with them on potential areas for partnership. These include organizational and board participation, placemaking advocacy within the county and city economic development efforts. Universities may be interested partners in efforts to create workforce development pipelines that help address workforce gaps in the tourism industry and providing research and expertise through professors and internship programs.

Timing: Long-Term • Driver: City and University partners

Goal #13: Designate an Individual within the City Manager’s Office to be responsible for Tourism

Rationale: Cape Coral needs to have a more clearly defined focus and take greater responsibility for increasing the number of visitors it attracts. While much of the work and resources should be provided by partners, there is a great deal of planning, coordination, and implementation that needs to be accomplished if Cape Coral is to be successful. A city employee should be designated as the individual responsible for tourism. This person will serve as liaison to various organizations (VCB, Chamber of Commerce, Hotel & Restaurant Association, Sports Development Department, South Cape Hospitality and Entertainment Association, etc.) on issues relating to tourism including product and event development, marketing, partnerships, and funding. Such a personnel commitment will help the city keep tabs on and help coordinate all tourism related activities that are going on in the city and county, provide leadership and help determine priorities, and show the community how the city has embraced the importance of tourism. Many of the recommendations listed above require an active participation by the city, and having one individual who has a command of everything that is going on will be essential.

Implementation: Finding resources for new personnel is rarely easy. The city should begin by giving the tourism responsibility to the appropriate person who is already on staff. It should then find one or two interns to assist this person. Finding tourism interns from the School of Resort & Hospitality Management at Florida Gulf Coast University would make sense. Over time, the city should review the current and expected future amount of tourism related work by the individual from the City Manager’s office and the interns, and the return on investment from having the tourism person on staff to determine what resources are needed.

Timing: Short term – City-led

Example: Some regions only have destination management organization responsible for tourism, others have a government employee or staff responsible, and some have both.

7.c Task 7 Progress Report/video conference

We conducted a video conference with the Project Review Committee on June 19, 2024. Work product to date was discussed and the materials covered were previously uploaded to the website.